

the central
question at hand:
Why do white
people have so
much trouble
correctly
identifying a black
person?

Several months of
research and
reflection on little
else but this topic
has led me to a
few conclusions.
These conclusions
are my own and
are not based
upon, or
necessarily
supported by,
empirical data.

By nature, people
are generally
homogenous. We
tend to prefer
those we are
familiar with,
those with whom
we identify. White
people tend to
prefer other
whites, as rich
people tend to
prefer the
company of others
with money. These

groups are not alone in that respect: black people generally feel most comfortable around other blacks and poor people around other poor people. There's a pre-established comfort level--a set of customs and mores already in place. The comfort level allows one to relax and live less deliberately.

Those of different races may have different customs and mores, different ideas of permissible speech, behavior, diet, and dress. The hair texture and styles of the various races is often different, as is facial and body structure. In light of these considerations, I believe the major

cause of the cross-racial impairment is the lack of familiarity with those of other races. We often work together, and at times eat together, but seldom do we live in the same neighborhoods or attend the same churches. These latter activities reflect, in my mind, our lack of comfort among those of other races. Sadly, it is a self-fulfilling cycle: comfort keeps us apart, and yet, living amongst each other would establish a comfort level. With this paradox as our communal mindset, familiarity is a difficult thing to achieve. How can one be expected to accurately identify a member

of a group with whom they are so utterly unfamiliar?

One of my colleagues has attacked my viewpoint as simplistic. He refuses to believe that familiarity with those of other races might alleviate the inaccuracy of cross-racial IDs. As support for his contention, he cites various authorities that conclude, "counterintuitively, the ability to perceive the physical characteristics of a person from another racial group apparently does not improve significantly upon increased contact with other members of that race"

Ironically, I believe these findings